

Jeremy Herb, *Star Tribune*

The Minnesota congresswoman pledges U.S. support to top officials, expresses hopes for "democratic transition."

WASHINGTON - As clashes between protesters and government forces grow increasingly violent in Yemen, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum traveled to country's capital this weekend, pledging U.S. support and aid in a speech to the prime minister and top Yemeni officials.

McCollum's trip thrust her into the middle of an increasingly volatile situation in the Middle East, where protests that began in Egypt and Tunisia have spread throughout the region. In Yemen, seven people have been killed since protests broke out there 10 days ago.

"The political transformation that has just taken place in Tunisia and Egypt was once unimaginable, but is now a reality," McCollum said in prepared remarks delivered Saturday to several hundred top officials and military personnel. "This desire for political reform, economic opportunity, and effective governance is a reality in Yemen as well."

McCollum has ties to Yemen because of her role in foreign aid as a member of the House Appropriations Committee.

While McCollum's trip was planned well before the protests began, McCollum said she never considered canceling. McCollum, who traveled to Yemen alone, was escorted throughout Sanaa by U.S. embassy officials.

McCollum said in a telephone interview from Yemen that she did not see the protests up close, but spoke to members of the opposition party and drove past tents near the protest sites at night.

"They're very excited about everything that's happening in the Middle East, and these dictators who have been here for decades and decades are finally going to be leaving," she said. "People will start finally controlling their own destiny."

McCollum's speech was delivered at a conference sponsored by the Washington-based National Defense University, which was organized to address Yemen's ongoing national security issues through combating both terrorism and improving social problems like poverty and a critical water shortage.

"This is a country in crisis," McCollum said. "If it doesn't make some pretty smart decisions pretty soon, it's going to run out of water. It's going to have a population explosion where it won't be able to feed and take care of citizens."

Robert Sharp, a professor at National Defense University and the conference's executive director, said that having McCollum speak raised the profile of the event and attracted top Yemeni officials. "When Congresswoman McCollum made herself available, they stepped it up and added in the prime minister," he said.

The only top official who did not attend, Sharp said, was President Ali Abdullah Saleh, whom protesters want to step down. Saleh has said he will leave office in 2013 and not appoint his son to replace him, but McCollum said members of the opposition party told her they are concerned he will not keep his word.

Addressing the protests in her speech, McCollum said she respected the country's sovereignty, but that people were calling for reforms.

"Young people across the Arab world -- intelligent, talented and determined -- want to control their own futures," McCollum told the audience. "With President Saleh's announcement that he will leave the presidency in 2013, America will be expecting the path forward to result in an open, democratic transition."